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AUTHOR Silver, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

Provision of adequate special education services within an individual rural school district is often not feasible, so cooperative arrangements seem a logical alternative. Cooperative arrangements vary on many dimensions including: number of school districts served, mode of governance, funding sources, staffing patterns, services rendered, professional personnel employed, and stated goals. This study examined cooperative arrangements for special education in rural areas to determine which were most effective in implementing special education procedures mandated under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). The relationship of size to compliance with these mandates was also studied. No significant relationships emerged between type of cooperative arrangement or number of students served and any of the compliance measures. Large cooperatives (greater than 2,000 square miles) reported the greatest degree of compliance while medium sized cooperatives (851 to 2,000 square miles) experienced the most difficulty. Despite this finding, respondents frequently cited distance as hampering the provision of special education services because of the time required for travel. (DHP)

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Sandra Silver, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Professional Education
Bemidji State University
Bemidji, MN 56601
218-755-3734

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Multi-District Arrangements for Special Education in Rural Areas

Multi-district regional special education administrative arrangements were examined to determine the types of arrangements currently used in the provision of special education services in rural areas as well as the effectiveness of these arrangements in meeting the mandates of PL94-142. The study found that the joint agreement cooperative was the most frequently used cooperative in the areas surveyed. It discovered that type of cooperative arrangement did not effect compliance with PL94-142 mandates. Cooperative size, however, did effect compliance. Cooperatives serving over 2000 square miles reported the greatest compliance with mandates related to assessment and placement of students referred for special education services.

Multi-District Arrangements for Special Education in Rural Areas

The passage of PL94-142, increased the awareness of the difficulties associated with the provision of special education services in rural areas. It was realized that many barriers to the provision of quality special education programs exist in rural areas including: funding inadequacies; difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified personnel; underdeveloped services; and transportation difficulties. Moreover, the mandates of the law and the consistency with which they are applied may hamper the provision of quality services (Schrag, 1979). The effective implementation of PL94-142 remains a critical challenge to the American educational system.

The passage of PL94-142 fostered a burgeoning of cooperative arrangements in rural areas. Because the provision of adequate special education services within an individual school district was often unfeasible due to limited resources and a scattered diverse special education population, cooperative arrangements seemed a logical alternative. The minimum allocation of $7500 per application for PL94-142 monies also fostered collaboration as many rural school districts were unable individually to generate a sufficient allocation.

Despite the lack of research regarding their efficacy, cooperative arrangements have increased greatly in number and structure. Cooperatives have arisen based on the belief that they will best enable small rural school districts meet the needs of handicapped children.

Cooperative arrangements vary on many dimensions including: number of school districts served; mode of governance; funding sources; staffing patterns; services rendered; professional personnel employed; and stated

goals. Even where uniformity might be expected (i.e. intermediate units operating under the same state mandates) a large amount of variance occurs.

Regional cooperatives are not a panacea for the difficulties inherent in providing special education services in rural areas. Cooperative arrangements may produce or exacerbate a variety of problems including: transportation difficulties, parental involvement, goal displacement, locus of decision making, physical location of the unit, personnel administration, and abrogation of responsibility for handicapped children to the cooperative unit (Helge, 1984; Ondell, 1982; Kirmer, Lockwood, Mickler, & Sweeney, 1984).

Ten components deemed necessary for a successful rural cooperative emerge from the literature. These are:

1. legilslation enabling cooperative development;
2. maintenance of local ownership of cooperative programs;
3. a spirit of cooperation among memeber school district;
4. protection of local autonomy;
5. dedicated leadership;
6. mission clarity;
7. ongoing planning;
8. clear lines of responsibility;
9. delegation of authority and responsibility; and,
10. adequate resources.

This study is aimed at dicovering the most prevalent type of administrative arrangement in rural areas. It will examine different types of arrangements to determine whether cooperatives possessing the above components are more

effective in implementing mandated special education procedures than those that do not.

Another dimension addressed by this study is the relationship of size to compliance with PL94-142 mandates. Despite reorganization, many rural school districts lack an adequate population base to provide comprehensive special education programs. The literature on rural education suggests the merits of various size school districts and recommends cooperative undertakings for the provision of equal educational opportunities. It is suggested that a minimum student body population of 15,000 is required to provide cost-effective categorical programs (Vuillemot, 1967; Helge, 1984). This study will therefore examine the effects of size on compliance with PL94-142 mandates.

The need for research concerning the provision of special education services in rural areas is well recognized (Jordan, 1966; Sher, 1977; Helge, 1984a). Despite the recognition of need, a dearth of research exists. The meager body of existing literature is viewed as: lacking experimental research; lacking sophistication; largely experiential based; failing to provide a comprehensive view of the rural education situation; and limited in its usefulness for policy formation (Stephens, 1984). Thus, the need for research concerning rural special education is evident.

Method

For this study, a cooperative is any inter-district administrative arrangement that provides services to member school districts. Cooperatives range from informal agreements between two or more local school districts to

structures imposed by a state education agency with a regulatory or service orientation. There are eight basic types of cooperative arrangement:

1. regional state agencies where administrative authority remains with the state department of education;
2. formal intermediate units, the second level of a three tier state education hierarchy;
3. mandated regional service agencies that remain apart from the formal state education hierarchy;
4. special school districts enabled by state legislation to provide designated services in a given locality;
5. voluntary cooperatives with administrative authority granted by the local school district to a new unit that undertakes responsibility for the provision and administration of special education services;
6. joint agreement cooperatives, an undertaking by two or more local school districts to provide special education servicess on a regional basis with administrative authority remaining at the local level;
7. satellite cooperatives where one school district provides special education administrative services to a group of neighboring school districts; and,
8. school study (development) councils, a loose confederation of local school districts under the sponsorship of a local college of education whose purpose is to solve defined educational problems existing in the member schools.

For this study a cooperative is considered rural when serving an area with less than 150 inhabitants per square mile or where more than 60% of the county inhabitants live in rural areas as defined and measured by the United States Census Bureau. Cooperatives serving regions located within Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas are not considered rural.

Sample

The United States is divided into ten Federal Education Regions. This study draws its sample from two of them: Region IV comprised of eight Southern States, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee; and, Region V comprised of six Midwestern States, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. These regions were selected because they include some of the nation's most rural areas.

The survey sample was obtained by writing to the State Department of Education in each of these 14 states and requesting a listing of special education cooperatives. These listings were used to determine whether cooperative arrangements existed. Two states, South Carolina and Florida stated that cooperative arrangements did not exist and were eliminated from the sample.

The lists provided by several State Departments of Education failed to indicate whether listings constituted individual school districts or cooperative arrangements. These states were recontacted to verify the existence of cooperative arrangements. This procedure led to the elimination of Mississippi and North Carolina from the sample population as their

respective State Departments of Education indicated that administrative authority rested solely with either an individual school district or a single county school district.

The remaining listings were examined to determine cooperatives serving primarily rural areas. 157 rural cooperatives in 10 states were identified. The director of each cooperative was selected for inclusion in the survey.

Instrument

To collect data regarding compliance with PL94-142 mandates, a written questionnaire was developed using the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978). The questionnaire items were generated from the manuals used by The Federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services in monitoring the states for compliance. A four point response scale was used for each question: always, usually, rarely, and never. Numerical scores assigned to the responses were 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively. An unanswered question was assigned a value of 0.

To determine content validity, the questionnaire was submitted to an expert panel including professors of special education, members of county offices of education, and one member of the Federal Office of Education. A pilot test was conducted during the summer of 1984. Based on pilot study results, several questions that caused confusion were revised.

Factor analysis using a varimax rotation was performed to determine the questionnaire items accounting for the greatest amount of variance. This led to a reduction from 53 to 37 items. A reliability assessment of the

questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha resulted in a standardized item alpha of .85.

Compliance Scales

Seven scales were constructed to determine the extent of compliance with PL94-142 mandates. These scales are:

1. assessment of students referred for special services;
2. placement of students in need of special education services;
3. programming for students in need of special services;
4. teacher knowledge related to special education;
5. administrator knowledge related to special education;
6. in-service regarding special education;
7. general compliance.

Reliability assessments using Cronbach's Alpha were performed on each of the seven scales (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

Of the 157 rural cooperative directors surveyed, 135 (86%) usable responses were received. One person refused to complete the questionnaire. Another person had retired and the position had not been filled. (This information was sent by a person in the agency who had previously completed the questionnaire). Twenty directors failed to return the questionnaire. Of

the 135 completed questionnaires, six respondents indicated they represented individual school districts and were eliminated from data analysis procedures. By states within regions, the sample population of usuable responses is displayed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Types of Cooperative Arrangements

The most frequently reported cooperative in the regions surveyed is the joint agreement cooperative that provides regional special education services while administrative authority remains with the local school district. Voluntary cooperatives where administrative authority is granted by member school districts to a new unit of administrative authority are also popular. This survey did not discover any school study councils. Satellite cooperatives where one school district assumes administrative authority for special education programs provided by neighboring school districts are rarely reported. Regional state agencies where administrative authority rests with the State Department of Education are also scarce (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Size of Cooperatives

Rural cooperatives show a wide degree of variation on several size dimensions including geographical area served, number of school districts served, and number of students served. A rural cooperative may serve a geographic area covering as few as 13 or as many as 16,000 square miles. It may serve as few as 2 or as many as 115 school districts. A cooperative may also serve as few as 50 or as many as 180,000 students. For data analysis, each size attribute was grouped into three categories; small, medium and large (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Relationships

An examination of the relationship between type of cooperative arrangement and each of the seven scales revealed chi square values ranging ranging from 1.62 with a significance level of .95 for the programming scale to 9.31 with a significance level of .16 for the placement scale (see Table 5). No significant relationships emerged between type of cooperative arrangement and any of the compliance scales.

Insert Table 5 about here

An investigation of the relationship between geographic area and each of the seven compliance scales ensued (see Table 6). In these analyses, chi square ranged from 2.61 with a significance level of .86 to 18.86 with a significance level of less than .01. Significant relationships emerged between geographic area served by the cooperative and both the assessment and placement scales. Further examination of the data revealed that for both of these scales large (¢ 2000 sq. mi.) cooperatives reported the greatest degree of compliance while medium sized (851-2000 sq. mi.) cooperatives revealed the most difficulty.

Insert Table 6 about here

An analysis of the number of school districts served and each of the seven scales followed (See Table 7). Chi square ranged from 4.02 with a .67 significance level to 11.09 with a .09 signifcance level. No significant relationships emerged between number of school districts served and any of the compliance scales.

Insert Table 7 about here

Next, an examination of the relationship between number of students served and each of the seven scales was conducted (See Table 8). In these analyses, chi square ranged from .93 with a .99 significance level to 10.42 with a .11 significance level. Significant relationships between number of

students served by the cooperative and compliance with PL94-142 failed to emerge.

Insert Table 8 about here

Discussion

In rural areas of Federal Education Regions IV and V, the joint agreement cooperative is the most frequently used cooperative for special education services. One reason for the popularity of this model is the retention of administrative authority by the member school districts. Maintenance of authority enhances local ownership of cooperative programs. The joint agreement cooperative also protects local autonomy, another of the components deemed necessary for a successful rural cooperative.

Joint agreement cooperatives are not delegated authority by member districts which can lead to unclear lines of responsibility and competition rather than cooperation among member school districts. The lack of administrative authority also makes it difficult to attract and retain qualified leaders. Without strong leadership, mission clarity and ongoing planning are hampered. Because funding is based on allocations from member districts, if even one district decides it does not want a specific service, the entire program may be jeopardized.

The effectiveness of the joint agreement cooperative is also brought into question by respondent comments. Respondents felt that the lack of

administrative authority was detrimental to providing needed services. Thus, despite its popularity, the joint agreement cooperative may not be the most effective arrangement for special education services in rural areas.

If the type of cooperative arrrangement is not mandated, various arrangements should be investigated prior to selection. In deciding the type of arrangement to employ, attention should be given to each of the components needed for a successful cooperative. Because delegation of authority is essential, arrangements such as the voluntary cooperative or the satellite cooperative are advised.

By definition, the voluntary cooperative is delegated administrative authority by its constituents. The cooperative assumes responsibility for special education programs. The structure of the voluntary cooperative maintains local ownership of programs while fostering a spirit of cooperation. This should lead to the appropriation of adequate resources. In addition, a governing board, usually comprised of local school personnel, enables mission clarity, ongoing planning, and clear lines of authority while providing the leadership to maintain cooperative efficacy. Thus, voluntary cooperatives can possess all the components deemed necessary for a successful rural cooperative.

The satellite cooperative also has the potential to provide the requisite components. The satelite cooperative involves a confederation of neighboring school districts with administrative authority delegated to a designated district that assumes administrative responsibility for all special education

programs provided by member school districts. It also provides the leadership needed for cooperative success.

The structure of the satellite cooperative maintains local autonomy and ownership of special education programs while fostering a cooperative spirit. Representatives of participating districts meet regularly to assure ongoing planning, mission clarity, and clear lines of responsibility. It must be noted that, by definition, satellite cooperatives are limited to proximate school districts. Given school district consolidation, this configuration is becoming increasingly rare making the satellite cooperative unfeasible in many areas.

In the regions surveyed, cooperatives serving the largest geographic areas (greater than 2000 sq. mi.) report the greatest degree of compliance with mandates related to assessment and placement of students referred for special education services. This result was contradictory to the hypothesis. Cooperatives serving the smallest geographic areas (less than 851 sq. mi.) did report greater compliance than medium sized cooperatives (851-20000 sq. mi.). This may result from the larger service area generating a greater fiscal base with which to provide services. It may also result from the use of alternative personnel and agencies to assess students. Compliance with mandates concerning assessment would enhance compliance with mandates concerning placement as adequate assessments are needed before children can receive special education services. Furthermore, evaluation personnel may facilitate the placement process.

Despite these findings, respondents frequently cited large geographic distances as hampering the provision of special education services. Respondents commented that transportation difficulties resulting from large geographic distances inhibit the provision of quality special education programs. The time relegated to travel for both students and staff was cited. It should be noted that transportation costs may totally negate the cost efficiency of cooperative programs (Sher, 1977). Moreover, because smaller cooperatives enhance local program ownership, it is recommended that geographic area, number of school districts served, and number of students served should be limited.

Summary and Conclusions

This study investigates cooperative arrangements for special education services in rural areas. Of the administrative arrangements investigated, the joint agreement cooperative is used most frequently by the cooperatives surveyed. Type of cooperative arrangement does not appear to effect compliance with PL94-142 mandates.

Size does play a role in cooperative efficacy. Although cooperatives serving the largest geographic areas (greater than 2000 sq. mi.) report the greatest compliance with PL94-142 mandates concerning assessment and placement of children, respondents cited distance as hampering the provision of special education services. Thus, geographic area, number of school districts and number of students served by the cooperative should be limited when feasible.

Further study of these issues is warranted to determine if the results of this study are representative of the entire country. This information would

be useful for rural policy development and woueld enhance the provision of special education services to handicapped children residing in rural areas.

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Table 1

Scale Reliability

Scale	Alpha	Standardized Item Alpha
Assessment	.71	.74
Placement	.73	.74
Programming	.78	.79
Teacher Knowledge	.71	.71
Admin. Knowledge	.82	.83
In-service	.77	.77
General Compliance	.85	.85

Table 2

Responding Cooperatives

Region IV				Region V			
State	Eligible Respondents	Responses Received	%	State	Eligible Respondents	Responses Received	%
Alabama	1	1	100	Illinois	21	16	76
Georgia	13	12	92	Indiana	19	19	100
Kentucky	12	12	100	Michigan	21	18	86
Tennessee	1	1	100	Minnesota	35	30	86
				Ohio	7	6	86
				Wisconsin	20	14	70
Totals	27	26	96		123	103	87

Table 3

Cooperative Arrangements Reported

Agency	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Regional State Agency	2	2%
Intermediate District	23	18%
Mandated Regional Agency	9	7%
Special School District	7	4%
Voluntary Cooperative	32	25%
Joint Agreement Cooperative	49	38%
Satellite Cooperative	5	4%
Unspecified	2	2%
Totals	129	100%

Table 4

Size Categories

Attribute	Small		Medium		Large	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Geographical Size	< 851	34%	851-2000	33%	> 2000	33%
Districts	< 7	34%	7- 12	33%	> 12	33%
Students	< 8001	37%	8001-1500	32%	>15000	31%

Table 5

Cooperative Arrangement by Scales

Scale	Chi Square	Significance
Assessment	4.06	.67
Placement	9.31	.16
Programming	1.62	.95
Teacher Knowledge	7.72	.26
Admin. Knowledge	8.74	.19
In-service	5.84	.44
General Compliance	8.01	.24

Table 6

Geographic Size by Scales

Scale	Chi Square	Significance
Assessment	13.89	.03*
Placement	18.86	<.01*
Programming	3.36	.75
Teacher Knowledge	10.18	.10
Admin. Knowledge	5.53	.48
In-service	2.51	.86
General Compliance	7.78	.25

$\chi^2(6, N=129)=12.59, p<.05$

Table 7

School Districts by Scales

Scale	Chi Square	Significance
Assessment	8.76	.19
Placement	4.06	.67
Programming	5.06	.54
Teacher Knowledge	11.10	.09
Admin. Knowledge	4.91	.56
In-service	10.20	.12
General Compliance	4.02	.67

$\chi^2(6, N=129)=12.59, p<.05$

Table 8

Students by Scales

Scale	Chi Square	Significance
Assessment	6.20	.40
Placement	10.47	.11
Programming	8.23	.27
Teacher Knowledge	4.43	.62
Admin. Knowledge	2.69	.85
In-service	.93	.99
General Compliance	5.20	.52

$\chi^2(6, N=129)=12.59, p<.05$